

Episode 27: Poet

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-seven: Poet.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyas: We sat in an amphitheater, enclosed on three sides, the fourth open to the street, so sound filtered out and into the city. It was eleven-fifteen in the morning, give or take, and Cassian and the kings and I were listening to poets sing.

The king was already asleep in his throne. The queen had a tight-lipped smile that reeked of disapproval that appeared whenever she glanced to her right to see the drowsy king, so she'd taken to not looking.

We'd been there four hours. The poets played on.

This competition had seemed fun in retrospect: listen to music, sneak out with Rhia or Cassian in the evenings and do fun

festival things that heavily relied on drinking and poor decision-making. Music and mayhem, king-sanctioned -- and we got a poet out of it -- we'd find our third, and I could convince them to come with me when I finally gathered my nerve and ran. It was a perfect daydream, in my head, and somehow it always ended with Cassian seeing his wrongs and tagging along, whether or not he was king after all. I wasn't ever really sure on the semantics of this part, glossing over it in my daydreams in a haze of *we'll get drunk and have a heart-to-heart and the whole thing'll get sorted*, but in all my envisionings of the poet festival, I hadn't expected -- well -- drudgery.

Here's how each performance went, roughly: the heralds called a name. Many of the names dragged on, title after title that the kings never seemed very impressed with stumbling out until a bard would climb onto the stage, instrument in hand, dressed in their best. After about an hour, it was easy enough to tell who was going to be shit -- the herald would announce their name for at least half as long as they ended up singing. It became a game between Cassian and I -- seeing how long we could make faces at each other as the shitty bards waited for their names to be finished before the queen caught us staring at hissed at us from between her teeth.

Cassian had glanced my way and mouthed *told you so* after the first one. It was then I remembered our conversation from

the first day under the enarbol -- something along the lines of only the unexceptional reaching for strings of titles to give them meaning. It seemed this applied not just to kings, but poets, too.

And just as it was easy to tell who was going to be shit, after an hour it became just as easy to pick apart those who were sponsored by someone in the court from the rest -- they would be dressed in a frightening amount of gold. While the caliber of performance seemed to be higher in this lot -- seemed the court had taken the promise of *generous compensation* at finding the next poet pretty seriously -- it soon became another joke between Cassian and I, trying to count from our distance the amount of precious metal laced onto each bard and comparing our tallies on our hands across the queen's disapproving form.

Don't get me wrong -- there were beautiful musicians. The first five and ten and fifteen I was entranced for -- at least, for all the non-shitty ones -- but you can only listen to something intently for so long before you start to zone out. Whoever had made the schedule hadn't seemed overly concerned with taking breaks.

Maybe that was shitty of us -- not taking this as seriously as all of the bards out there singing. Somewhere in my mind, I guess I'd figured that I'd know when I heard them. Even though it was never my intention, I found myself comparing these poets

to the one Rhia and I had heard in the Eligidanim Traem, who sang out our prophecy with such soul-shaking certainty.

They always fell short.

A lunch break came at noon, and I practically leaped to my feet, desperate to be out of my chair and moving after so long. I was starving, and a little bit cranky, and had to stop myself from snapping at the courtiers who swarmed our row as the queen tried to subtly wake the king and Cassian and I stood. Servers came, too, bearing food, and I cast my gaze desperately to Cassian, hoping he'd see how badly I needed to start walking. His return glance told me to cool it.

I snagged a roll from a tray and squeezed my way over to stand behind Cassian, stretching onto my toes to put my chin onto his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his torso from behind. *I'm bored*, I huffed around a mouthful of bread, and he tilted his chin so he could make sure I saw him straight on as he rolled his eyes. *And I'm pretty sure half these people are lying about their age. I highly doubt there are this many seventeen-year-olds in Rhysea, let alone musically talented ones.*

This is important, Ilyas, he said, but I know you know that. We will know when we find the right one. It's just a few more hours, today. And then we'll spend the evening in the city.

Getting drunk and eating sugar scones? I asked hopefully, half teasing, half demanding.

He snatched the other half of the roll from my hand and lifted it to his mouth. I made a face, and he raised his eyebrows, as if to say, *not as if our lips haven't been closer.*

Which made me lose my mind again. I untangled myself from him and folded my arms against my own chest.

Sure, he said, as many sugar scones as you can stomach without throwing up on your boots.

Sugar scones was a safer topic than kisses. *It'll be more than you can.*

Right, Cassian laughed, because you've got both the sugar-and alcohol-tolerance of a child. It's not a fair competition.

I smacked his arm and turned to get more bread. At the far end of the row, Io from the Far Shore talked to a guard who, after a long moment, let him pass. Io locked eyes with me and grinned wickedly, teeth sharp and glinting.

Snake alert, I hissed, tracking Io tracking us as he slid through the crowd to where we stood. Cassian frowned, confused, before following my line of sight to Io from the far shore, ten feet away and getting closer every second. He shifted, then, into a princeling, a change I caught as it happened rather than after. His posture straightened, chin lifted, eyes shutting down

into something cooler.

I vehemently ripped into my bread.

Io stopped, bowed. Came up with that same dangerous grin he seemed to live in. *My sovereigns*, he said.

Io from the Far Shore, Cassian responded smoothly, in Rhysean. It was easy to see him as a king when he acted like this -- the kind that would rule like his parents. He was a kinder sort of king, more sunset-gold, less burnished, when he laughed about sweets and lay upside-down off a bed and stopped posturing. Pretending. *I hope you are ready to spin gold today, as you promised.*

Always for you, my king, said Io. He turned to me. *And what does the soldier want from my show? Gold, too? A flower, to tuck into that hair of yours?*

Cassian translated. I raised an eyebrow. *How about a short performance and a tray of sugar scones?*

It sounded less bitchy in Rhysean, but that was only because I didn't know how to make it sound bitchy in Rhysean. Full bitchiness was intended, in the English I arranged it from in my mind. Io chuckled -- *gods*, do you know how much I hate that word? *Chuckled*? But it was true -- and it fit him, and it conveys just how uncomfortable the not-quite-laugh was to hear.

As the king wills it, Io responded. I didn't need a translation for that. And I was already enough on edge around

him to understand the message in it -- *I'd be the king's poet, not yours, eligidida.*

That was fine. I made a mental note that, if for some godsforsaken reason he was the poet, I would silently inconvenience him with shitty bits of magic for as long as we had to work together.

But Cassian seemed to like that response. A glint came into his eyes -- the wheel-churn-y kind. Io was a contender to Cassian, and we hadn't even heard him sing yet.

Show us your skills, Cassian said. *But don't be a -- he used a word here -- pendarferronear -- that doesn't have an easy translation. It's like... show-off, and pompous asshat, and overconfident purveyor of mediocre talents rolled into one.* I think it was a joke. *Don't drag it on. I'd like to see the festival before midnight.*

As you wish, my sovereign. Io bowed again, hands clasped in front of him. *So you'll be attending the festival this evening?*

Ilyas and I along with the rest of Rhysea, he said. *It's hardly surprising. Who wouldn't want to see the city lit up?*

I can't imagine, my king. He turned to me. *Eligida. I wish the both of you the best of afternoons.* He paused. *And that you find the right poet, king. Whoever they may be.*

And with that, he left.

I don't like him, I said the second I was sure Io was out of earshot.

Why not? Cassian asked, but before I could spill a million versions of he's cunning and slippery and seems like he'd bring a gun to a knife fight, the competition was starting once more, and I was sat back down into my chair, listening to a thousand and one more poets.

That was when Leander walked onto the stage.

Do you remember Leander, listener? The bard of the Eligidanim Traem. I told you, then, that they were important to our story, but not quite, at the time. We've traveled the miles to go to reach their crossroads.

This is Leander. And they're glorious.

Leander Feldrea Enrellero, called the herald, and Cassian sent me a look that meant, this should be good, because there was just enough divination in the name Feldrea Enrellero -- a play off of the words Feldram Enrellem, which is like... an enchanted old story. A legend given voice and wind. From the Southern Fronts. No sponsor.

I caught my breath as they stepped onto the stage. I recognized them, felt the chill run through my chest at the thrill of magic like this, stories told like they did.

This is it, I couldn't help but think. Screw Io from the Far Shore and every last string on his lyre. Cassian will hear them, and he'll know.

Leander stood differently, on that stage. They'd been so comfortable in the tavern, sure of their actions. Inspired and alight with the ideas they held, that they dug up and spilled out for the rest of us to cling to and hope. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a king who will right this broken world.* They'd gestured and argued and turned it over to song when words failed, words failed.

Here, they hesitated. Closed their eyes, steadied themselves. Hitched in a breath, then another, one-one-two-two.

And then -- gods above.

I've compared them to Orpheus. It's the closest we have to a similar legend, where the flowers bloom and the night weeps comets down to earth and you're stretching, stretching, trying to pluck stardust from the sky to create a vessel big enough to hold it all. It's haunting melodies and mourning for a world and hoping for something better in the same breath, it's plucked strings and minor keys and a soaring voice thick with love all the same.

How do you describe the song of a poet who can spin gold from air? How do you describe the song of a poet, so perfectly in tune with your soul that maybe it's your heart that's stopped

beating or maybe it's that the song is so perfectly in synch that you can't hear the pounding but for the plucking of the lyre?

I didn't even realize I was crying until I felt the wet on the backs of my hands, until Leander's last note swayed out over us and they hesitated, hesitated, before dragging a fist, thumb flat against the top of it, from shoulder to shoulder and crossing their fingers out towards us like a broken promise. They ducked their head and left the stage. I sat, frozen, as around me the arena began to clap. I didn't know how to move after that. How to act.

The next bard walked onto the stage. Cassian caught my eye and gestured to the tears staining my face. My face flushed, and I snapped back into focus, scrubbing my palms against my cheeks and mouthing *the song* back to him. *Leander from the Southern Front*, I said, as the next poet began to screech out their tune. *Pers. Please.*

He grinned and turned back to the stage.

The sun began to set. Somewhere in the mix, Io finally played, a song somewhere between fine and fair, an idolation of the kings. A bootlicker -- he made no point of hiding it, though that didn't negate the threat he seemed to be. The crowd clapped, and he bowed, and gestured grandly towards our booth.

His lips formed the words *for the kings*, but the sound was lost underneath the noise of the crowd, applause and such.

He did not turn words into gold like he'd promised. But he'd instead proved something much more useful: he was malleable. Power is power to some, no matter what you have to do to keep it.

Cassian nodded. As did the queen. *I think he did well*, said Cassian, and I felt a sick sort of dread in the pit of my stomach. *Ilyas? You agree?*

I think he was fine, I replied, careful to keep my tone neutral. *But there were others I enjoyed more.*

He made a sound of dissent. *Music is subjective*, I suppose.

The last poet played, and we headed out for the festival.

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast, where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little lymerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan,

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